

KATHRYN BUTLER

The Dreamkeeper ~ SAGA ~



The DRAGON *and the* STONE

“I could not put this book down! Butler brings creative imagination and spiritual depth together in a way that keeps children engaged and curious. The larger-than-life storyline of *The Dragon and the Stone* is worth daydreaming about at your desk and discussing with your family around the table. Be prepared for your kids to initiate creative projects after reading!”

Gloria Furman, author, *Labor with Hope* and *A Tale of Two Kings*

“*The Dragon and the Stone* displays all the imagination a book about the realm of dreams *should* have. The stakes are high—in that realm, and this—but it’s worth braving the dangers.”

James D. Witmer, Managing Editor, StoryWarren.com; author, *A Year in the Big Old Garden*, *Beside the Pond*, and *The Strange New Dog*

“*The Dragon and the Stone* invites young readers to make an exciting journey into the realm of dreams with Lily McKinley and her eccentric companions. With a great deal of inventiveness and a touch of whimsy, Kathryn Butler takes readers on a perilous ride that they won’t want to end. I was gripped from the first chapter, and I expect families will soon be clamoring for the next book in The Dream Keeper Saga!”

Betsy Childs Howard, Editor, The Gospel Coalition; author, *Arlo and the Great Big Cover-Up* and *Polly and the Screen Time Overload*

“Interesting characters and exciting action, vivid locations, and important lessons. This is just the kind of book my children loved to read—and the kind of book I loved to read to them.”

Tim Challies, blogger, Challies.com; author, *Seasons of Sorrow*

“In *The Dragon and the Stone*, Kathryn Butler has created a place of belonging for the uniquely creative among us—the girl who finds herself lost in daydreams or the boy who wishes his imaginary creations were real. But it’s not a realm for them alone; it’s a world that calls us all to realize the gifts of creativity we’ve been given and to employ them in serving God and others. Readers inspired by the journey of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, the redemption of Eustace Scrubb, and the loyalty of Ron and Hermione will find a new story to capture their imaginations and their hearts. Read it with a child, read it by yourself—just read it.”

Catherine Parks, author, *Empowered and Strong*

“*The Dragon and the Stone* is a captivating story with undeniable Christian themes, making it a literary treasure that adults and children of all ages will enjoy. In it, Kathryn Butler enlivens the imagination through vivid storytelling while pointing to hope and redemption that only Christ can offer. I cannot wait to read this wonderful tale with my family!”

Hunter Beless, Founder and Host, *Journeywomen* podcast; author, *Read It, See It, Say It, Sing It: Knowing and Loving the Bible*

The DRAGON and the STONE

The **DreamKeeper** ~ SAGA ~

The DRAGON and the STONE

Kathryn Butler

 **CROSSWAY**[®]
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

The Dragon and the Stone

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Published by Crossway

1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

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Published in association with the literary agency of Wolgemuth & Associates

Cover design: Studio Muti

Interior illustrations by Jordan Eskovitz, Crossway

First printing 2022

Printed in the United States of America

Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-7947-9

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-7950-9

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-7948-6

Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-7949-3

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Butler, Kathryn, 1980– author.

Title: The dragon and the stone / Kathryn Butler.

Description: Wheaton, Illinois : Crossway, 2022. | Series: The dream keeper saga ; book 1 | Audience: Ages 9–12. |

Summary: "Twelve-year-old Lily discovers a stone pendant and is transported to a realm where people's dreams come to life"—Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021047628 (print) | LCCN 2021047629 (ebook) | ISBN 9781433579479 (trade paperback) | ISBN 9781433579486 (PDF) | ISBN 9781433579493 (Mobipocket) | ISBN 9781433579509 (ePub)

Subjects: CYAC: Dreams—Fiction. | Magic—Fiction. | Adventure and Adventurers—Fiction. | Fantasy. | LCGFT: Novels. | Fantasy fiction.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.B8935 Dr 2022 (print) | LCC PZ7.1.B8935 (ebook) | DDC [Fic]—dc23 LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021047628LC> ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021047629>

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

VP	31	30	29	28	27	26	25	24	23	22				
15	14	13	12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

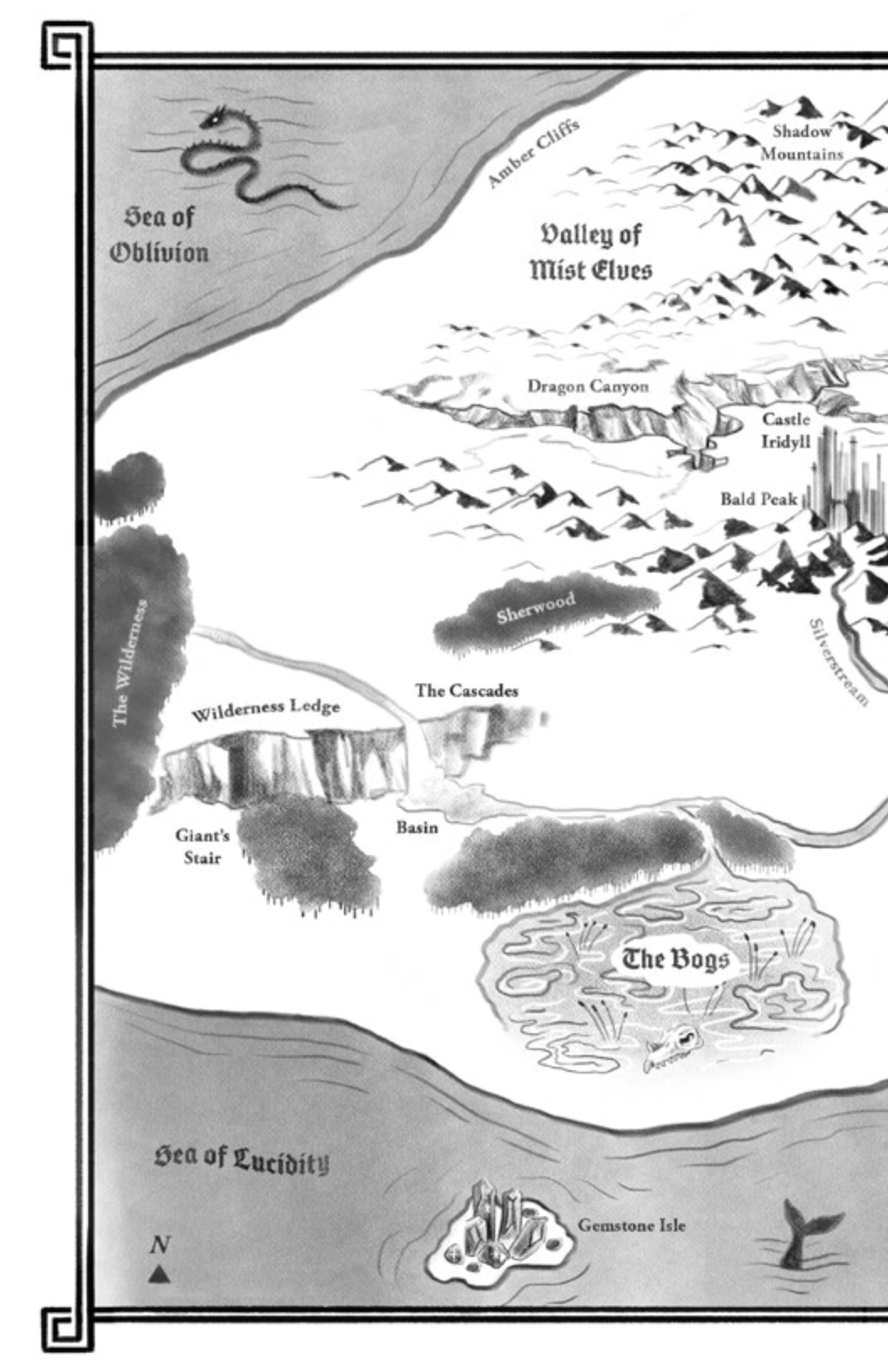
*To Jack and Christie, my favorite adventurers.
May your imagination spark reminders of his light.*

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Sea of Oblivion

Amber Cliffs

Shadow Mountains

Valley of Mist Elves

Dragon Canyon

Castle Iridyll

Bald Peak

Sherwood

The Wilderness

Wilderness Ledge

The Cascades

Silverstream

Giant's Stair

Basin

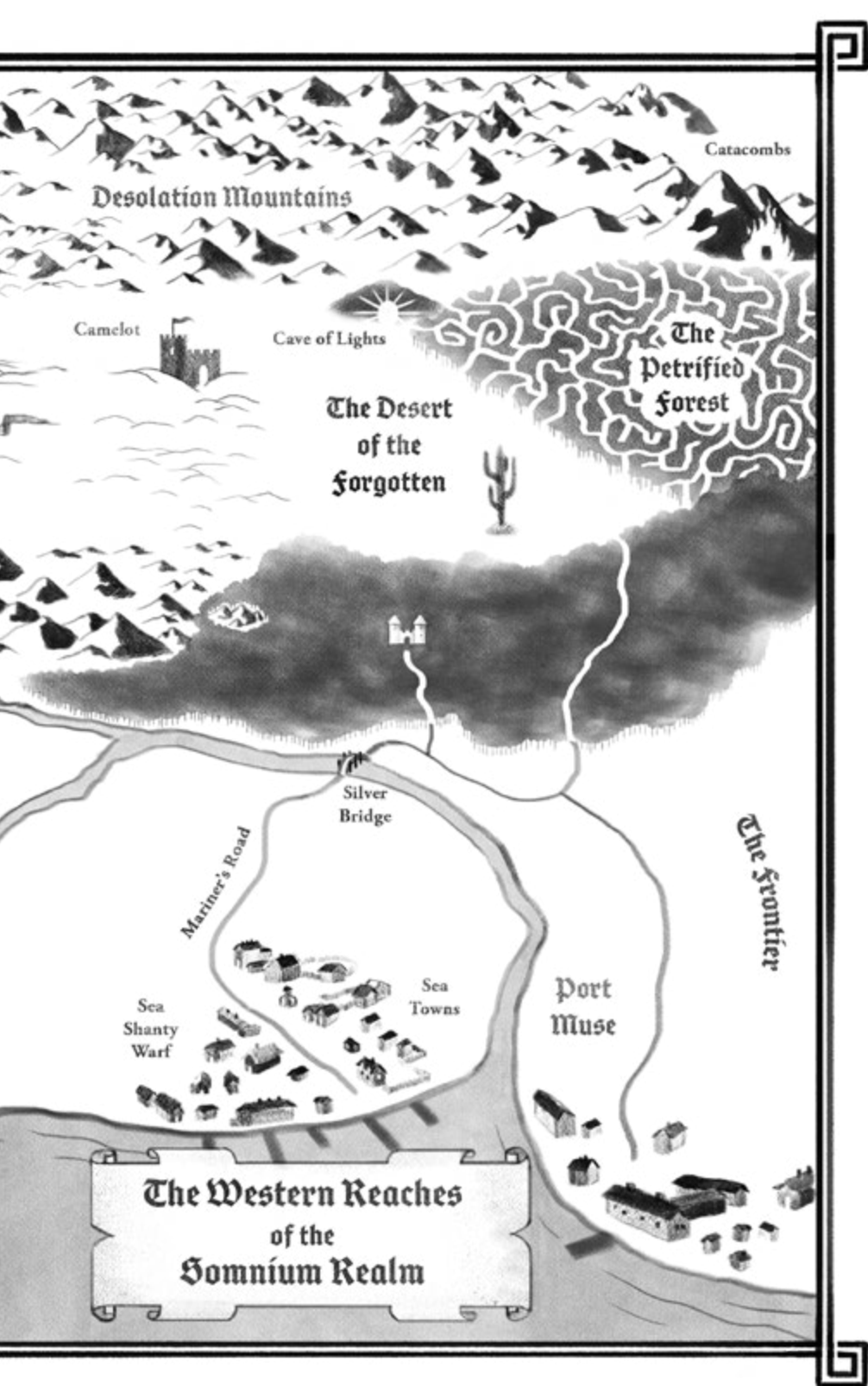
The Bogs

Sea of Lucidity

Gemstone Isle

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CHAPTER 1

The Dragon in the Kitchen

Lily McKinley trudged into the house, plodded to the kitchen, and froze. On the counter in front of her, with its barbed tail curled like a question mark, a dragon gobbled her mother's Crock-Pot chili.

Before this moment it had been an ordinary Tuesday. Lily forgot about a science test again and muddled through questions about the water cycle in an anxious sweat. During recess Adam Sykes stole her copy of *King Arthur and His Knights*, and with his signature sneer he chucked the book into a mud puddle. Lily blotted the soaked pages with the hem of her jacket, and her throat tightened when she accidentally tore one of her father's sketches drawn in a margin.

She arrived home with the beloved book clutched to her chest, then tripped on the stoop again. She paused at the mirror in the entryway, stood on her tiptoes to peer into the glass, and discovered a smear of banana—a relic from a food fight on the school bus that morning—still encrusted in her hair, with a wayward clump protruding from her head like the appendage of an insect. “This was in my hair all day?” she moaned. She raked her fingers through it, but only succeeded in tugging a few strands of hair from her scalp.

In the living room, her grandmother sat in her usual armchair in front of the television. “Hi, Gran,” Lily said, kissing her cheek. “Is Mom asleep?” Gran mumbled something unintelligible, and Lily dropped to her knees to meet her at eye level. A flicker of recognition brightened Gran’s face, and with a tremulous hand, she reached to cup Lily’s cheek. “Daniel . . .” she whispered.

“No, Gran. It’s me, Lily. But I miss him too.” She clasped her grandmother’s frail hand, and Gran stared back, her eyes urgent and pleading. Then, as if blocked by a falling curtain, the spark in Gran’s eyes dimmed and her attention returned to the screen.

Lily kissed Gran again and headed to the kitchen for her routine snack. She let her bookbag drop with a thud, as always. She massaged away the headache throbbing behind her eyes, as she usually did after such a day.

Then she saw it. It perched on the kitchen counter, its scales rippling and bloodred under the overhead lights.

A jolt of panic gripped Lily’s chest. She took a step backward, then rubbed her eyes as if to wipe away a lingering dream. *It’s*

my imagination again, she told herself. The scar on her palm, a relic from her explosive efforts to make flying shoes in the microwave, reminded her of the last time her thoughts went wild. Lily blinked, expecting the apparition to vanish and the day to grind on as usual.

Instead, the beast dived deeper into the pot to slurp up the dregs.

This can't be happening. Dragons aren't real! Lily's heart pounded. The creature stood no taller than her neighbor's Labrador retriever, but the claws with which it clasped the Crock-Pot tapered like daggers. As she examined its serpentine body and its sharp wings folded against its back like razors, her disbelief gave way to terror.

There was no mistake. A dragon was in her kitchen.

Lily's mind raced. Two months ago, she would have dashed to find her parents if she saw so much as a spider on the floor. Yet as she stood rooted to the spot before a bloodthirsty monster, she thought of her mother, and she hesitated. Too often lately, Lily found her mom collapsed in exhaustion, her head dropped onto the crook of one arm, with an untouched cup of coffee still steaming beside her. Lily would place a hand on her shoulder, and when her mother lifted her head, she'd squeeze Lily's fingers. "It'll be all right, Lily," she'd say. Then she'd slog to a stand, wrap Lily in her arms, and head to the hospital to work another overnight shift.

Lily had witnessed too many of those afternoons to disturb her mom now, when she'd finally squeezed in some sleep. She

thought to call for Gran in the living room, but Gran couldn't eat or dress herself on her own, let alone face a dragon.

There was no one to help. Subduing the monster was up to Lily—a shrimpy twelve-year-old with banana in her hair.

Her eyes darted from the dragon's fistfuls of claws, to the window, to the sink, to the counters. *What should I do?* she asked, wringing her shirtsleeve as she fretted. *What can I do?* All the details she'd read about dragons—the fire breathing, the treasure hoarding, the maiden swiping—rushed through her mind in a frightening tangle. Surely, she was no match for this beast. Yet, what alternative did she have? If she stood idly by, she might be swiped herself. Or worse, barbecued.

Lily saw a wooden spoon discarded on the counter and still plastered with tomato paste from her mom's dinner preparations. Slowly, silently, she stretched out her hand. *Please don't make a noise*, she thought.

Her fingers trembled as she grasped the handle, but to her relief she retrieved it without a sound. She clenched her teeth and held the spoon aloft in front of her, as she'd seen so many knights raise their swords in the stories she loved. She imagined what Sir Lancelot or Sir Galahad would do . . . if they fought with spoons.

Lily drew a deep breath, and then counted down.

Three.

Two.

One.

“Daniel!”

Lily wheeled around. To her horror, Gran stood behind her, propped against the doorframe, a quizzical expression creasing her face. Lily waved her off. *No, Gran! Go! Get out of here!* she mouthed.

It was too late. A growl like the sound of crunching bones broke the silence. Lily turned to see the dragon's head lift from the pot. Its yellow eyes narrowed to slits and glared at her as steam spewed from its nostrils.

"Gran, get out!" Lily yelled.

The beast launched into the air with a piercing screech. Its wings spread like a cloak above them, blocking out the light, and then flapped a few strident beats that churned up a windstorm in the ten-by-ten-foot kitchen.

The wind tore dangling pans from their hooks on the walls. The Crock-Pot tipped over, sending beans and sauce streaking across the floor. Salt and pepper shakers crashed against the cabinets, and boxes of cereal flew from atop the refrigerator, then blew open to unleash a hail of flakes.

Mustering all her courage, Lily ran into the center of the kitchen and swung the spoon at the beast. As usual, she was too short. She sliced empty air, and in fury the monster bellowed a roar that rattled the silverware in the drawers and rocked the windowpanes in their casings.

The dragon slashed its talons just inches from Lily's face, and she ducked to the floor to avoid a whip from its tail.

"Get away!" she yelled at the monster. "Leave us alone!"

Another shriek split the air. Plumes of smoke filled the room, and the dragon's eyes hardened with malice.

"Leave us alone!" Lily shouted again.

Suddenly, a flash of light flooded the room. Lily shielded her face against the blinding glare, which mottled her vision with swirling colors. The light pulsed for a few seconds, and then, as quickly as it had begun, it snapped out.

When Lily dared to open her eyes, the beast had vanished.

She fought to steady her breathing, and turned to Gran, who leaned against the doorframe and hid her face. Beside her stood Mom, with a hand on Gran's shoulder.

Lily rushed toward her. "Mom!" she said breathlessly. "Did you see it? Did you see what just happened?"

"Lily, what—"

"There was a dragon, Mom! A real dragon! I know it sounds crazy, but I swear it's true! It was eating our dinner, and when I came into the kitchen it flew into the air, and everything started flying around—"

Lily noticed the stricken look on her mother's face. It was the same expression her mom had given her the time a costume party with their cat earned her a trip to the emergency room, and when her attempt to brew an invisibility potion drew the fire department. Lily braced herself for a lecture, perhaps even some yelling.

Instead, her mother did something much worse: she buried her head in her hands and started to cry. "I can't do this," she said through her tears. "I can't do this alone."

Lily's heart lurched. She surveyed the destruction in the kitchen: the soiled floor and counters, chili splattered on the ceiling, dishes smashed, cornflakes jammed into every crevice. "Mom, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I'll clean it up, I promise."

Her mother drew a breath and wiped her eyes. She tucked a few flyaway strands of hair behind her ears and smoothed her nursing uniform.

"It's okay, honey. Don't mind me. Just leave it." She tossed a hand in the air to dismiss the mess, but she couldn't disguise her weariness. "I'll help you clean it up tomorrow. Just take care of Gran. Make sure she takes her medicine before bed."

"Okay, Mom. Don't worry. I'll take care of everything."

Her mother forced a smile through her tears, then kissed Lily on the forehead and left for work. Lily watched her go and stared at the closed door even after the headlights faded down the street.

Lily gave Gran her medicine and tucked her into bed, then filled a bucket with water and added a squirt of dish soap. As the treefrogs and crickets filled the night with song, and as other kids in the neighborhood pulled on their flannel pajamas and hunkered down for bedtime stories, Lily scrubbed counters, scoured the floor, and washed pots. She vacuumed cereal from unlikely corners and shoveled Crock-Pot fragments into the trash.

After she'd wiped the last blobs of food from the walls, she retrieved *King Arthur* from the floor and shuffled to her room. Her head throbbed again. The dragon had seemed so real. Yet,

how could it be possible? Her mom didn't believe her. Maybe she *had* dreamed it all up. Maybe she got carried away with her imagination again.

Lily flipped through her book to clear her head. Puddle water still dampened its pages as she sat on the bed and perused stories of dragons and quests that she could recite by heart. She longed for the world she glimpsed in the pages—an era when knights challenged evil against insurmountable odds and good pulsed in the heart of every champion. A place where hope throbbed like a heartbeat.

She lingered over a charcoal drawing in the back, featuring a bald-capped mountain with a ten-spired fortress, a valley unfolding beneath a setting sun, and a winding river. The drawing was her father's.

Her eyes danced over some verses he'd scrawled in a corner of the page. He'd sung them countless times: while tucking her into bed, or while holding her after she'd stubbed a toe. As she read them, Lily sang softly to herself:

Carry me past the silver stream
Into the realm of living dreams.
There in the cool and whisp'ring night
I'll wait for you in the cave of lights.

She dwelled on the last words for a moment, then turned the page. To her surprise, something slid from the book.

Lily's brow furrowed. In her lap lay a silver chain, with a pale, teardrop-shaped stone dangling from one link. A swirl of white mist seemed suspended in its depths.

How did this get in here? She ran her fingers over the smooth surface of the stone. Her father had worn it for as long as she could remember; he said he'd found it in the creek behind his house as a boy. His story had inspired her habit of ducking her hands wrist-deep into muddy creek banks to search for magic stones.

She felt grateful. Its weight in her palm felt like a part of him she could keep and hold. Yet in all her twelve years, she'd never known him to take it off. Had he really left it for her before he departed on his trip? Had it really been in her book all along, safely tucked away for all these months since he'd died?

She draped the necklace over her head and patted the stone where it rested over her heart. Then she reached under her pillow for her dad's shirt, a tattered, flannel rag her mother always teased him about. After two months, it didn't smell like him anymore, but after a few rolls of the cuffs the sleeves felt soft and welcome against her arms.

She lay down and tried to sleep, but her mind stirred with a mess of thoughts: dragon wings, sponges, smeared banana. Science tests, scales, and claws. The discovery of a pale stone.

The memory of the dragon's eyes penetrated through all the images. Their bilious shade, and the ruthless way they bore into her made her shudder. She hoped they would never lock her in their menacing gaze again.

THE DRAGON IN THE KITCHEN

And yet, in a part of her mind she couldn't explain, she marveled about what would happen if they did.

She drifted into a fitful sleep. Hours later, when the stars blinked awake, the stone around her neck glowed like a dollop of moonlight.